

ON PAGE 2-D

ROGER FONTAINE

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# Trying to decipher Ortega's tea leaves

Nicaragua's Holy Week incursion into Honduras was designed to decapitate the anti-Sandinista resistance forces in something very like a final offensive.

That much is clear. But other aspects of Managua's search-and-destroy mission are shrouded in mystery. Adding to it is a Washington press corps that is ignorant about intelligence techniques and steadfast in its willingness to accept the Sandinista versions of events.

Although it was Managua which ordered an attack that knifed 15 miles inside Honduras and although it was Managua which lied about it (repeatedly), for much of the media, it was Washington's credibility that was at stake.

As for the Sandinistas, they proved themselves to be formidable adversaries who should never be underestimated. Daniel Ortega is a Communist, but he is not a "bumbling" or an "incompetent" one, as has been suggested.

He does want to win, and soon. Admittedly, Nicaragua's leader may not be not in sync with Washington's political calendar — Mr. Ortega certainly does not give a fig about giving his Washington friends decent political cover — but the amazement expressed here over the incursion's "bad" timing, shows how provincial Beltway insiders really are.

In fact, Sandinista timing of the incursion was excellent, following as it did significant "contra" reversals in the field and in Washington.

Moreover, by adapting Anwar Sadat's tactic of hitting Israel on Yom Kippur, Mr. Ortega measurably

increased his prospects for success. Timing the assault to coincide with the *semana santa* — a period of maximum inactivity in Central America — he hoped to catch the rebels and the Honduran government — quite literally — napping.

In short, it was a calculated risk in his view, one well worth taking. And considering the heavy covering fire of excuses and non sequiturs laid down by apologists for Nicaragua, its failure doesn't seem to foreclose future raids, either.

Other factors may have played a part. But which ones? Did the House vote telegraph American weakness? Or the reverse? Did Managua believe military assistance would be forthcoming eventually? If that was its judgment, then a pre-emptive strike at the "contra" infrastructure before the aid arrived would surely be logical.

Only the *comandantes* know for sure, and they're not saying. But U.S. analysts now favor the latter explanation, although the former is politically more appealing to an administration that still has not convinced a majority on Capitol Hill that the Sandinistas pose real danger to real American interests.

As for the "contras," yesterday's conventional wisdom pronounced them whipped, a spent force, a rag-tag collection of Somocista loafers living off American welfare.

Instead, although outgunned, they met at least three crack Sandinista battalions head-on and bloodied them badly.

Their victory at Yamales does raise another question: how good is the Sandinista army? For years the Reagan administration has charged that Nicaragua possesses the largest, best-equipped, and most threatening armed force in Central America. On paper, it is a formidable machine. Still, it didn't do well. Why?

The first possible explanation is the simplest: it's not really that good. It will be interesting if administra-

tion critics who already believe the danger has been overblown now use this as an argument against future administration requests for aid to the resistance.

The second explanation is more complicated. It is well-known that the Sandinista "irregular-warfare" (counterinsurgency) battalions are trained and officered by Cubans, right down to the fighting units. Per-

haps prudence dictated that foreign advisers not lead their Nicaraguan helots in this battle, in the belief that if a Cuban were to be caught in Honduras there might be unfortunate repercussions. But without their real officers, even crack troops can collapse in the face of a determined enemy.

That is speculation, however — pointing again to the fact that the

intelligence on what actually happened is less than complete.

But that simple fact seems to have been ignored in the press coverage of the incursion. The Nicaraguan government intended, after all, to carry out a covert operation, and the Sandinistas are pretty good at keeping their secrets.

But it was the American government the press chastized for not giving

an early, consistent, and detailed account of what had happened. Since the press pooh-poohing of a CIA list of Communists involved in the 1965 Dominican civil war, the American media have seemed incapable of learning the basics of intelligence collection and analysis.

Even the best intelligence service seldom, if ever, can provide laser-precise numbers, much less gauge

intentions — especially in the middle of a fast-breaking development. Officials looking at the same data can come up with different estimates.

Despite that, however, all the normal difficulties in assessing available intelligence were ignored by the media, and the incursion story soon turned into that familiar Washington press game: "We don't believe you."

Furthermore, media claims that the profession requires a skeptical attitude in assessing American government claims would be more convincing if the same had applied to Nicaraguan government pronouncements as well.

Managua not only lied, it kept issuing new and contradictory lies in a kaleidoscope of mendacity. Yet Managua was never pressed very hard on this, and the early unqualified denials were reported in a matter-of-fact fashion, without the slightest trace of skepticism.

Certainly, CBS did not press the point with Daniel Ortega when the Nicaraguan leader even lied about his government's lying.

"Let me make clear that we have lied at no point. What we have stated is that we have not invaded Honduras, we have not committed any act of aggression against Honduras."

That may be a fine distinction for some, but it is a distinction. Unfortu-

nately for Mr. Ortega's credibility, Nicaraguan officials never made the distinction.

One example. Five days before Mr. Ortega's appearance on CBS, his army chief of staff, Joaquin Cuadra, said at a press conference:

"Not in the last week or ever have our troops crossed into Honduran territory to combat the 'contras.'" In the same interview, Mr. Cuadra said fighting had taken place, but on Nicaraguan soil.

A side-by-side comparison of the two statements, of course, exposes the relative crudity of the deception. But that comparison was never made. Mr. Ortega's transparent deception was either passed on without comment or ignored.

*Roger Fontaine, chief diplomatic correspondent for The Washington Times, formerly served as a senior staff member of the National Security Council.*

